

# FCC Consumer Advisory

## Hurricane Katrina and Your Wireless Phone Service

### Background

Since Hurricane Katrina hit, the FCC has received hundreds of questions from victims, relatives, and other concerned Americans about placing and receiving phone calls, restoration of communications networks, bills, and service contracts, among other issues. The FCC has coordinated with communications providers to ensure that communications services are restored to the affected Gulf areas as soon as possible. Additionally, the FCC and wireless carriers are working to help those who lost service because of the storm contact friends and loved ones through other means. Further, providers have assured the FCC that those displaced by the storm will not have service disconnected or be placed in delinquent status for not paying their bills.

### Interim Measures Provided by Wireless Telephone Carriers

Many wireless companies have implemented measures to help those affected by the hurricane. Customers should contact their wireless service providers to determine what specific relief may be available to them. Some of these measures include:

- Agreeing not to disconnect services to customers from impacted areas for non-payment of bills;
- Developing customer-friendly billing practices for affected customers;
- Free long distance, roaming, and text messaging in affected areas;
- Free wireless broadband to relief agencies to help reunite displaced families;
- Free phone calls and phone charging services to those affected by the storm at open retail store locations in the hardest hit areas, including Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Gulfport, Mississippi;
- Free Wi-Fi service at HotSpot locations in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana;
- Installation of emergency communications centers throughout the region, where customers can send text messages and make long-distance calls free of charge;
- Cell phone distribution and provision of long-distance calling cards to those displaced by the storm; and,



- Enabling customers to donate to the American Red Cross directly from their wireless phones by text messaging the word "HELP" to the short code 2HELP (24357).

### Public Safety

Carriers and equipment manufacturers are helping support public safety officials, emergency first responders, and others in affected areas, in many ways. These include:

- Providing priority network access;
- Providing thousands of free wireless phones; and,
- Providing first responders with emergency communications trailers, generators, and other equipment.

### Service Restoration

Carriers are working around-the-clock to restore services to areas impacted by the hurricane. Many wireless communications networks are operating on battery back-up and on hundreds of portable diesel generators.

As services are restored to affected areas, carriers are expecting heavy call volumes and some call congestion. **Carriers are advising customers to use text messaging while service is being restored.** Text messaging uses less bandwidth than voice calling does, so there is a better chance that your message will get through.

### Questions and Answers

#### **Will my service be cut off if I was unable to pay my bill because of the hurricane?**

No. The FCC has been told by several major wireless carriers that at this time they are not pursuing any collection activities in the Hurricane-stricken areas along the Gulf Coast. Customers in the affected areas who cannot pay their bills will not be disconnected. Additionally, the FCC has taken steps to ensure that wireless service providers do not improperly disconnect consumers displaced by Hurricane Katrina because they are unable to pay their bills. To ensure that consumers have access to their wireless service during this difficult time, all wireless service providers serving consumers affected by the hurricane were required, by Thursday, September 8, 2005, to verify their compliance with the standard industry practice of maintaining service to people displaced by the hurricane despite failure to pay bills.

**I am having trouble placing and/or receiving calls. What should I do?** The network that provides your wireless service may be down. Some wireless providers are issuing temporary numbers which can be used until your network is fully operational or if you relocate to another area and would like a permanent number change.

**Will I be required to change my price plan(s) when my wireless service provider issues my temporary number?** No. Your existing number will remain active for billing



purposes so that you will continue to pay for the service(s) that you currently subscribe to. However, circumstances may vary. Check with your carrier for further information.

**Will my service contract be extended because of my temporary number?** Probably not, but you should check with your wireless carrier for more information.

**How can I make, or request changes to my service plan(s)?** Check with your carrier for specific information.

### **Tips to Wireless Users in Affected Areas**

- **Through the Lifeline Program, the FCC is providing support for free wireless handsets and a package of at least 300 free minutes (up to \$130 per household) until March 1, 2006.** For more information regarding telephone service help for victims of Hurricane Katrina, visit <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/katrina>. Also see <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/KatrinaTelephone.html>.
- Limit wireless phone usage whenever possible by calling one or two out of town contacts to let them know you are safe, and asking them to spread the word to your family and friends.
- When possible, keep a charged back-up wireless phone battery on hand. With a back-up power source, wireless customers can continue to communicate by swapping out the battery with the charged battery once the power has drained.
- Use text messaging while service is being restored. Text messaging uses less bandwidth than voice calls, so there is a better chance that your message will go through.

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*For additional information regarding Hurricane Katrina visit  
<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/katrina/>.*

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